

Corporal Delbert P. Berninghaus

422nd Regiment
106th Infantry Division



In his memoir, Delbert Berninghaus does an excellent job describing for the reader what life was like for a new private in the U.S. Army in 1944. He also describes very effectively what happened to the 106th Infantry at the Battle of the Bulge. As he writes about night watch duty in the Ardennes Forest, it's impossible not to feel some of his fear as the snow dropping from trees sounds like approaching enemy soldiers. His detailed account of the first weeks of his captivity is equally compelling.

Those men who were captured late in the war did not know the depravation of prison life as long as some Americans did, but their experience was equally as harrowing in most respects other than length.

Del was imprisoned at Stalag IV B near Muhlberg, Germany. One POW described it as, "a beautiful wooded area, on the banks of the Elbe River, about 25 miles downstream from Dresden. . . drab wooden barracks were divided into rooms or huts about 15 feet square with 25 or 30 men in each."

Many of the men at IV B were evacuated along with Delbert early in February; others, however, remained at the camp until the Russians liberated it in May.

After Delbert returned home to West Bend, Iowa, he began farming. He married a hometown girl, Irene Balgeman, on April 22, 1946. They owned and operated a Century Dairy Farm (homesteaded by Delbert's grandfather), raising grain and milking cows for a number of years. The family consisted of four children, three daughters and a son. They were blessed with sixteen grandchildren. After 45 years of marriage, Delbert is now a widower. He has served as one of the top officers in the Iowa American Ex-Prisoners of War Association.

Delbert's book, aided by the editing of his daughter Nancy, was first published in 1992. A sequel was later printed which included reactions from readers. Among those readers were fellow POWs who "wondered who that skinny PFC who crawled out the boxcar window to save us was."

I want to share my experiences of being in the service and as a prisoner of war during the Second World War.

On the day before Christmas, I bid my family farewell and boarded a bus for Camp Dodge, Des Moines, Iowa. My first stop was the first step of a journey that would affect me the rest of my life. It was not a happy Christmas for me. Before I left, I put my Christmas gifts from my family on a shelf in my closet and there the packages remained unopened on Christmas Day. I tried to push the day out of my mind, but Christmas memories were with me. I knew my mother would be fixing the Christmas goose and dressing; there would be sweet potatoes and pies. My four brothers, my sister, and my parents would be attending Christmas morning church services after the morning chores were done. Later, they would all gather around the Christmas tree with the rest of our relatives and open gifts. For the first time in my young life I was absent from the festivities. Christmas was just another day at Camp Dodge. The day

came and the day went and other than memories of home, I had nothing that seemed like Christmas. Little did I know my next Christmas was to be even worse than the one I was experiencing.

I was inducted into the United States Army on December 29, 1943. Memories of Camp Dodge are difficult to recall after all these years. I was there only briefly - approximately three weeks. One thing I do recall is singing a solo in a talent show during my stay there. Another part of my stay was a physical examination, which included an eye test. My left eye is weaker than my right or what one would call a lazy eye. The doctor thought I was trying to fake this condition, so they put me in a cold storage situation. I was placed into a frigid room without any clothes. After what was a considerable amount of time, I called out, "Just how long are you going to keep me in here?" It was cruel and inhuman punishment for a crime that I was not guilty of committing. Finally I was released and nothing more ever came of it.

My next step of the journey took me on a train to Camp Blanding in Florida. It was here that I would have my basic training. I was assigned to Company "C." In this unit, we were all given bugles. I did not enjoy this company, even though I had played a trumpet in my high school band. We were taught several calls and then given our assignments for each day. Being in the bugle corps is not anything like it sounds - playing reveille was a very small part of our duties. We were the scouts, a very important job, and I enjoyed this phase of my training very much. I also received special training in the Morse Code. It was not easy for a country boy to concentrate on the different sounds necessary to translate the code. I did master the skill, but was never given the opportunity to use it. As I mentioned earlier, Company C was not exactly my first choice. When I came to Camp Blanding, I had hopes of becoming a cook and had tried to be assigned to that division.

Even though I was young, perhaps it was because of my youth, I frequently spoke my mind and defied the authority around me. Maybe I was a bit of a rebel. While walking on the grounds of the base, we were to salute the officers we would see or meet. I got tired of this nonsense and would turn my head as not to see them. It wasn't long before I would find myself being sent to the kitchen as punishment for my misbehavior. Little did they know, it was no punishment for me — I wanted to be assigned as a cook in the first place. My misdeeds got me where I wished to be in this instance, but this would not always be true.

My initial impression of Camp Blanding can be summed up in words that I used when I wrote home, "If you haven't been stationed at Camp Blanding, try and stay away from it. Sand and more sand; it's all sand — why you even have sand in your bed!" The food was wonderful and the officers were swell, but the sand was unbelievable when you grew up on the black fertile soil of Iowa.

On the rifle range, I received a sharp-shooter score when using the M-1 rifle. I was impressed with the weapon and how it handled. The automatic rifles that we were using would automatically kick the shell out of the chamber when it was fired. I was a left-handed shooter, and this caused a real problem. When the cartridge was ejected, it would hit my helmet causing a clinking sound. The officer in the area noticed the noise and asked if I thought I could switch and shoot right handed. I gave it a try and will admit, it was awkward at first, but before long I had it mastered.

When we would go out on the rifle range, we would stay in pup tents. Two fellows would share one of the tents. It seemed to rain daily; and being in a sandy low area, the rain would run in rivers. We would build dams around our tents, pushing the sand up against the sides, hoping to keep the water out. Sometimes we were successful with our endeavors. It was our responsibility to keep our M - 1 s clean and in good condition; not an easy task with two boys in one tent during the rain. And then there was always the sand that seemed to find its way into everything, including our guns.

Camp Blanding gave me the opportunity to make several friends and to acquaint myself with a new region of our vast country. One weekend I remember was spent

going to Silver Springs. Two of the boys and I had a weekend pass to leave the camp. We went to a motel or hotel to spend the night. Our room had a large ceiling fan circling overhead; before morning I was very cold and had a sore throat. The discomfort of the night was soon forgotten and we continued to our destination in the warm Sunday sun. Silver Springs was a day of adventure. We rented a glass bottom boat and hired a guide to tour the lake. Our guide told us the lake was fed by a main spring of water that had been discovered 500 years ago. The spring was so abundant, it could furnish every person in the world with ten gallons of water a day. The temperature of the water in the lake was at a constant cool of 70 degrees year round. The water was so clear you could see down to the very bottom of the lake. As we began our tour, the view to the bottom of the lake was breath taking! The lake was indeed crystal clear. We could see the plant life reaching up from the lake floor and the fish gliding through the vegetation. Catfish, we were told by our guide, weighed seventy pounds or more in the lake. As we watched them, they reminded me of submarines patrolling the area. There were so many of them, they had difficulty reaching the bread we held out to them in the water without colliding with each other. Our guide told us it was a fisherman's paradise; to me, it certainly appeared to be true.

We swam in the lake and toured the grounds. I had my picture taken in a snake gallery .The photograph shows me, a smiling young soldier, with a six to eight-foot-long snake with a body circumference of six to eight inches, wrapped around my neck. It was a tame reptile, but known to become temperamental. This was a photograph to send home along with the one I had taken with me seated on the head of a long-horned steer. I sat between its horn span of six to seven feet. Pockets empty we headed back to camp, hoping to come again, but not before another payday.

Our time away from the base was frequently spent on the Florida beach. It amazed me to be able to walk along the shore in the morning only to find at nightfall the tide had come in and the ocean now covered the same area. The Florida sun took its toll, too. I remember catching hell one morning — we were to do our morning calisthenics, but I was so sunburned I could not move my muscles.

When I had the opportunity, I would attend services at a nearby Lutheran church on Sundays. At one of the services, a familiar face greeted me. Leo Wehrspann, a young man from my hometown area, was also in the armed forces. He was serving in the Navy and was a member of the choir at the Florida church. Leo pulled me aside before the service began, gave me a choir robe and said, "You can sing with us, Delbert." I protested that I didn't know the song, but he assured me, "Oh, yes you do!" I sang with the choir on that Sunday. Music had always played an important role in my life. I had done solo and small group singing and did enjoy joining the choir.

I will always remember pitchers of fresh-squeezed orange juice for sale. Florida orange juice was sold everywhere for fifteen cents a pitcher. The taste of it is still fresh in my memory.

The people of Jacksonville also left an impression on me. Frequently, families would invite a houseful of GIs home for dinner. It was a treat for us, so far from home, to have a home-cooked meal.

Passes were a welcome recess from our training, but a small portion of my time in Florida was spent on them. After all, I was in the Army, our country was at war, and I was learning how to be of service and how to survive. Basic training came to an end and the dentist was my next stop.

It was the Army's responsibility to see that we were in good physical condition. The dentist on base checked my teeth and felt the need to pull two of mine prior to our unit going out on bivouac.

Bivouac was a two-week period in our training when we would learn survival

techniques such as setting up and breaking camp, crawling, marching and other moving maneuvers. The area we were sent into for this training was a swamp with tall grasses and marshy wet lands inhabited by alligators, wild boars, and snakes. The temperatures were cold and damp through the night and late into the morning, then hot and humid until evening again brought relief. The night was filled with darkness and unfamiliar sounds. As we lay in our pup tent, we would hear the gnashing sounds made by the alligators. They would open and close their jaws; and as they did so, their teeth would clatter in the night. Rest did not come without difficulty.

In the morning, we would break camp, careful to leave the terrain as we had found it, hoping to defeat our imaginary enemy by our trickery. We would carry our packs, which consisted of: trenching tools, shovel, blanket, plate, canteen, and sometimes rations. As the sun climbed the morning sky, the temperature also rose and it would again become hot and humid. The coats so needed for early morning warmth would be shed and added to the weight in our packs. On our backs, we would carry a load of fifteen to twenty pounds of necessities. Our march would take us through the wet muck of the marsh. Our boots would be covered with mud, each layer adding to the strain our bodies must endure. We would dig trenches, crawl into sandy fox holes, and finally our day would end.

It was during this time my mouth became very sore — so sore in fact that I could no longer open it. The warm temperatures and the humid air, in addition to the general conditions under which we lived, had no doubt contributed to the infection which set in where my teeth had been extracted. With my fingers, I had to literally push food I was attempting to eat between the spaces left between my teeth. I was sitting away from the rest of the group while eating, to conceal my problem, when I was approached the First Lieutenant. He had been watching me and wondered why I was eating in such a manner. I told him of my recent tooth extraction and my concern that if I revealed my illness, I was afraid I would have to repeat my basic training as one of the other boys had to do when he became ill. The lieutenant reassured me my basic training would not have to be repeated, but that I did need medical attention. I was sent to the base hospital for four days of treatment. When my condition improved, I rejoined my unit on bivouac to complete my training.

The region in which we were training was infested with alligators. An engineer corps was actively seeking an eight-foot specimen. It seems the gator was a threat, although we were never informed of the nature of the threat. We did learn of its capture. The engineers made a feast of the fellow, none of which was shared by us!

Wild boars were a continual nuisance. My birthday, May 19th, was approaching, and my mother had baked and sent to the camp an angel food cake. Having recently recovered from my tooth infection, I was looking forward to the treat. However, it was not I that feasted on the cake; the wild boars raided our camp during the night and my cake was one of their targets. The boars also were credited with forcing our unit to endure a twenty-five mile, forced double (running) march. We broke camp one morning, taking care to bury our debris and leave the site as we had found it. A colonel, who seemed to always be on our case, later inspected the site. Sure enough, we failed to meet his standards again. The swine had rooted through our site uncovering all we had buried, leaving the area totally unacceptable. We were not happy to endure more than was required. As far as we were concerned, we had done what was expected. The twenty-five-mile course was more than many of the boys could endure. The heat and humidity were unbearable. The Staff Sergeant in our unit was a very compassionate man. He would not ask his men to do anything he, himself, would not do. His comment was, "If you can't do it yourself, don't expect someone else to do it." Wise words that I later would use myself. The sergeant asked me to carry another boy's pack — he had already collected two packs for himself to carry from boys that could not make it on their own.

We thought the punishment unfair, after all "Was it our fault?" the swine had rooted through the area. At our first opportunity, we surrounded a herd of the boars, forced them into the lake, and bayoneted them to death.

Basic training came to a close, and I was looking forward to my two-week furlough. While waiting for my destination papers, I worked in the base theater making popcorn and seating patrons. The manager liked me and was working on making my next assignment one to keep me in my present position. He almost had it arranged when my orders arrived — report to Fort George, Maryland, in two weeks.

I came home on a train, not notifying my parents of my plans. It was a shock for my parents to see me walk through the yard toward the house. Dad was just finishing up the evening chores, and Mom was in the house preparing supper. It was a tearful homecoming for each of us, and I decided that shocking my parents with my arrival, as I did, was not necessarily the best way to come home. They were happy to see me, but the surprise was unnerving. Being a close family, and I being the first of their children to really leave home, it was great to be reunited.

Things had changed during my brief absence. One of the first things I did the following day was to climb the 98-foot tower supporting the new wind charger power system that had been installed on the farm. For the first time, the farm was supplied with electricity. We had light bulbs instead of a little gas flame from carbide lamps. After chores, I told my dad, “Dad, I’m going to climb that tower and see what it looks like up there.” To my dad’s dismay, I climbed — it took longer than I expected to reach the top. I could see for miles, the town of West Bend, and the farms of my family —uncles and brothers — farms of friends. Absorbed by the view, I felt a peace that would serve as a source of strength in the trials to come, a peace I would not know again until the war had ended and I would experience freedom.

My Christmas packages I had placed on the shelf of my closet were waiting right where I had left them the winter before. I opened them; the shirt from my folks and the other gifts were again returned to the shelf. There they remained during my time in the service.

It was great to be home again with a mother to feed you, clean for you, and wash your clothes for you. And my mother was doing her job well, so well she washed the clothes in which I had pocketed my destination papers. I didn’t know where I was going after my papers were laundered. The help I needed in my dilemma came from the Red Cross Office in Algona. It was there that one of my former grade-school teachers, my fifth-grade teacher, helped me find where I was to be shipped in my next step of active duty.

My fourteen days at home flew swiftly by, and before I knew it, my two weeks were gone. I was again on a train, this time my destination Maryland. As the train wheels clicked over the track carrying me far away, my mind too turned over the past two weeks and the memories I was storing away. I saw myself at the station with my three friends, Salty (Richard Harms), Wayne Sell, and Ronald Miller. I boarded the train and stood at the back of the caboose waving to them, tears streaming down my face, as they stood on the tracks returning my waves until we could no longer see each other.

My stop in Maryland was brief. After four weeks at Fort George, I returned to the Midwest where I was stationed at **Camp Atterbury**. Camp Atterbury, Indiana, was very up to date as it was only two years old. As luck would have it, if you can call it luck, I came to Camp Atterbury with the thought of getting more training, but there was a division short of men, and I was chosen to help fill the quota.

Here I was assigned to the **106th Division, Company One, the 422nd Infantry**. The 106th was known as the Golden Lion Division. We wore a shoulder tab of a lion head on a blue and red field. The blue background stood for the basic complement of the infantry. We were basically an infantry division. The red stood for the artillery wing and the lion’s head for the strength the world now knows was theirs. Our division’s motto was “To Make History Is Our Aim”. The Golden Lion Division was noted for its vigor, high morale, and youth. Two-thirds of the men were twenty-two years old or

younger. I was twenty-one years old in May 1944.

I trained at Atterbury for one and one-half months, from September to October 1944. It was during my time in Indianapolis that I was “adopted” by my second family, Grandma and Grandpa Hansen and their four children, Alma, Eleanor, Hilda and Herbert. The first Sunday I received a pass, I attended a Lutheran Church service. The Hansen family regularly attended that same church and they, like many of the Indianapolis families, welcomed me and others like me into their community and homes. The Hansens invited me home to Sunday dinner with the family. From that time on our lives were entwined. I attended church whenever I could obtain a pass. I had many good home-cooked meals in the Hansen home and enjoyed the fellowship they offered to me. They became my second family. When it came time for our division to be transferred from Atterbury, it was the Hansen family that was there to see me off at the station. They gathered around me to bid me farewell as I again boarded a train to cross the states of our country. I was not the only soldier on board, but I felt a loneliness, a loss, as I was again leaving people that I had grown to love as my own family. I was once again stepping into an unknown. The train moved across the countryside; I was lost in my thoughts, remembering my family back on the farm, leaving West Bend on the train, and the first church service in Indianapolis, Indiana, that bonded me to my “other” family, the Hansens.

We had scheduled stops in the cities of Boston and New York. The days spent in those two places have become a blur in my memory. For the most part, the days were spent in the barracks.

On October 21st, 1944, we boarded the Queen Mary in the New York Harbor. We crossed from harbor dock to ship on a rope ramp. It was similar to a trampoline walk; our feet sank into the ropes with each step. Our ship slowly moved out to sea passing our “Lady Liberty” with her hand holding the torch — the Torch of Freedom for all to see. And each of us stood on the deck watching as our symbol of freedom sank out of sight on the horizon. For some there would be no return trip; I could not help but wonder if ever I would see it again.

For the next eighteen days, our base would be the Queen Mary .The vessel transporting us to our next destination held me in awe and filled me with curiosity. Having never been on an ocean liner before, I had many questions, not many answers, but time stood still those two and one half weeks it would take to cross the seas and time was mine. I did have an assignment; our company was to fill the role of Military Police while on board the ship. It was our duty as MPs to scan the horizon for enemy ships and submarines that we might encounter on our way and to report any aircraft sighted overhead. We had no escort as we tried to elude the enemy. Our only means to avoid any detection was to weave in a zigzag fashion across the waters; the vessel carrying us was not built for battles on the seas.

The Queen, a British liner, was a city in itself, stretching 1,020 feet in length. I remember standing on the top deck watching the waves as the ship rocked its way through them. The Atlantic Ocean is noted for its high seas. At times, waves came right up over the bulwarks of the ship. Scavengers of the sea, large fish and sea gulls, followed in our wake. Many of the boys became seasick; fortunately, I did not have that problem. There was a small store where I purchased a box of Hershey Almond chocolate bars. I made the purchase to follow some advice given me, “Don’t eat a lot, but keep your stomach full and you won’t get sea sick.” I munched on candy bars all the time. There were scheduled activities and entertainment available to enlisted men, but definitely more privileges were extended to the officers on board. At night, we slept in the belly of the ship on swinging hammocks, so close together that we would hit one another if there was much pitching of the ship. In the morning, the air on deck was filled with the aroma of freshly baked bread made in the ship’s bakery.

The possessions we had with us when we boarded ship were stowed in our duffel bag. Each of us had been issued our own rifle, which would need to be cleaned prior to use. The rifles issued were covered with an oil-like grease as a protection for the

metal and wood. We were advised not to clean them on ship due to the salt-water conditions we were in while on board. I followed that advice in order to prevent any corrosion of my weapon.

Our journey was uneventful; our ship docked on the British shores around the eighth of November. The English weather was most unusual, not like anything I had ever experienced. It would rain, the sun would shine, and it would snow; every season of the year was experienced in one day's time.

We had a couple weeks in England before our orders were given to us. The climate was damp, but it didn't worry the English, no, they would just go out and work in the rain. I was most interested in some of the rural customs, such as their fences. With my country background, it certainly didn't remind me of home; it didn't resemble the heartland of America. The fences on the farms were constructed of small rocks, every rock placed just so, giving evidence of the time and great care taken in construction them. It must have taken them years. Other boundaries were neatly trimmed hedges similar to those one might find around homes in our country. Everything was very neat, giving evidence of great pride being taken in their properties.

Two other things stand out in my mind as I recall my short time in England. The men all seemed to wear neckties to work regardless of their job. It appeared as though both laborers and businessmen dressed in ties as they went about their daily tasks. The other thing I noticed was the large numbers of women who smoked cigarettes. The percentage appeared much higher to me than in the States.

I had the opportunity to go to London on a four-day pass, to see first-hand the damage war inflicts on a country. There was evidence of rationing and Black Markets operating much as they did in America. The stores appeared well stocked, but everything was rationed or priced too high to be affordable.

The American Red Cross was also operating in England and was most helpful while we were there. They offered continual assistance.

It was there in England that my rank was elevated from private to Corporal Delbert Berninghaus. We would be recommended for the rank change by the noncommissioned officers of our company. I went up a step on the Army ladder.

In December, we received our orders. I wrote home to inform my parents of our destination. Later, I learned censors had deleted the information I gave to them. They could only guess at where I might be. They thought it might be Belgium; they were right on target.

Our unit was transported by truck to the area where we were to cross the English Channel. We were loaded on LSTs, landing craft, and carried across the channel to the Belgium side. There we were put on alert in the Ardennes Forest as a replacement unit for the Second Indian Head Division. For some time, that division had been in the twenty-seven-mile stretch we now occupied and had reported it to be a quiet area. Due to lack of any prior combat action, we were there as a "green" organization. They put us in an area that was supposed to be a quiet area where nothing was happening or expected to happen. I imagine they thought it would be an ideal place to initiate us; where we could learn the terrain of the country and sharpen our skills.

Each of us had a buddy; my buddy and I were assigned to the lookout area. The bunker that housed the two of us while we were on duty was built down in the frozen ground. The roof was flat and camouflaged with turf. We had to go down below ground level to get inside, but it was high enough for us to stand, once inside the structure. There were boughs from the fir trees to lie on if one of us became tired. We watched through three peep holes, just above ground level, with dimensions of about 8 by 18 inches. It was here we stayed day and night until our shift ended and the next two on lookout duty relieved us. Our meals were delivered to us at the bunker site. We were armed with our M-I rifles plus a bazooka. A bazooka was effective against the armored tanks. It is best described as a weapon that is portable, with an electrical

firing device that launches a rocket propelled through a tube to the target. It required two people to operate, usually one to carry and fire it and the other to load and aim it. It was a fairly new means of defense, one that I had never been trained to use. I had no bazooka experience, even though my official records listed me as a Bazooka gunner; there was no time for any training now. Our orders were to shoot out the German tanks' tracks as a means of disabling them should we sight any in our range.

The routine continued day in and day out. For nine days we watched during our various shifts. The forest of oak, beech, and fir trees was behind us, a vast white field of snow spread out before us. The snow clung to the trees and covered the terrain. The area was void of any noticeable wildlife; no birds sang in the trees. There was a small grouping of trees in view to our left with what might have been a road behind them. Occasionally, we would catch sight of one of our scouts, dressed all in white to camouflage their movements, steal across the field. The scouts traveled from camp to camp on their missions. Time would drag on as nothing was happening. Yet fear was a constant companion. Was there really an enemy out there? Would the German army strike? and if so when ?

We took turns doing night patrol. When it came time for my buddy or me to take our turn, we would be relieved of our bunker duty and someone else would take our responsibility there. We would take up position in the forest for the next four hours. The first night I was on night patrol, the darkness was still; winter stretched out its fingers touching us with cold. I wore my combat boots, field jacket, and helmet with liner for protection from the elements. We had no overcoats or overshoes as we stood in the wet snow, stood, watched, listened, then moved on to repeat the cycle in another location. Fear and cold were our only companions as we walked the quiet darkness of the forest.

The snow was wet and heavy as it clung to the branches and sides of the trees. I can still see in my mind's eye the night, moonlit, crisp, cold and silent and then I heard a sound. "Wer ist das?" came the cry from my throat as I threw myself face down in the snow. I froze. Hearing the sound again, I again called out in German, "Wer ist das?" (Who is that?). Still no one answered me. I knew, despite my fear, my ears had not played a trick on me; the sound was real. I held my position; not moving a muscle. It came again. It was then I knew my fear; heavy snow was being pulled from the branches by the force of gravity and dropping to the ground. The footsteps I heard were not those of the enemy, but those of the snow stepping down from the trees. Relieved and thankful I rose from the ground to my feet and again started walking. After what seemed an endless night, dawn broke and my four hours were up, my shift ended and another day began in the bunker. This cycle was to be repeated in the days ahead.

As usual, the ninth day there was nothing unusual to report. The night began and I was again on night patrol. Winter had not eased her grip on the area, but why should she — winter had just begun. The air was crisp and cold, the night still and quiet. I kept moving over my watch area: stop, look, and listen before moving to the next spot. My shift had begun at ten that night. As I moved over the area, at one point my stop, look, and listen routine was altered. More than snow broke the silence; it was shortly after midnight that I heard the Germans moving in. I could hear the sounds of metal hitting metal, the distant rumble of their motors from machinery and trucks, and, yes, voices, men talking. My body tensed; this was it, what I had been trained for, the unknown was about to happen. I made my way back to the Intelligence Headquarters Office not knowing how close the German troops were or how many of them were headed our way. I called in from the outside phone to report the activities. The reports were always one-sided conversations — we would make our report and then move back to our watch position. Before long I was again back at the headquarters' office with the same report, "the Germans are coming!" Once again I returned to my position with still no change in our orders. I continued to patrol the area knowing something was about to happen. For the third time, I made my way back to Intelligence Headquarters, reported that the Germans were on the move. Still there was no change in what we were to do, and to this day, I do not understand why we

did nothing but wait and watch. At the end of my watch, I returned to the bunker. It was shortly after two in the morning and I was tired but unable to sleep, my body tense and my mind wondering when we would make our move. Sleep came, but not a restful sleep. Shortly before dawn, we were awakened to learn that we were moving out.

We were assembled to leave, pack and rations on our backs, guns over our shoulders and one shell for ammunition. We moved out over the vast white expanse that we had viewed from our bunker while on look-out duty. Our whole company, dressed in army green, moving across the white plain of snow had to be spotted almost immediately by German scouts. Were we sent out as decoys being used to distract the enemy from another unit? Maybe. What was our purpose? Where were we moving out to — a safer area, a battlefield? Questions riddled my mind. Why were we issued just one shell per gun?

The march went on all morning with very little change in the pace or the scenery. At one point, the officers and noncoms told me to take the field glasses and check a particular area. I carefully scanned the territory sweeping my glasses in each direction. There was no movement or sightings made by me. I reported back. By early afternoon the terrain began to change. As we approached a valley, there was tension in the air. It was here that we heard the first shots. We were instructed to proceed down into the valley. We forced ourselves ahead, various numbers of men in each group, running in spurts down the hill into the valley. When you felt your courage mount, when you felt you had enough guts, it was your turn to run down. The only wound I was aware of that incurred during this run was to the company mailman. He was hit on the arm by the enemy fire.

As we regrouped to continue our march up the other side and leave the valley behind, our concerns became more tense. The enemy indeed was very near. A lieutenant in our company motioned me over to his side. He indicated to me that he wanted me to look over the crest of the hill. It was obvious to each of us that there were German forces over the hill. "The hell with you!" I told him. "The only way I go up there is with you." We never went. It was my theory he wanted me to draw fire up there and determine where the concentration of the enemy force really was located. As we reached the other ridge of the valley, we could clearly see the enemy soldiers dressed in army green still some distance from us. There was no place for us to go, no hiding place in the openness of the limestone valley, no trees for protection. Armed with our rifles and only one shell, we were no match for the numbers ahead. It appeared that we had marched into a horseshoe of soldiers — Germans all around except to our back. If we attempted to retrace our steps, we would be sitting ducks by the time we reached the opposite side of the valley.

Our officers faced the dilemma with the only solution available — surrender. Surrender — can you imagine! I didn't know what to feel! I wanted to fight, to defend myself, my friends, my country. I wanted to survive, to live my dreams of youth. What would become of us if we surrendered? To fight meant a sure wounding and probable death, but surrendering . . . what would that mean for us? My mind raced; it was a flight or fight situation and we were surrendering. The officers of our company stationed a pole with a white flag in the open field as we awaited the approaching enemy. We took our weapons and destroyed them, striking the rifles against any material that offered resistance, the frozen turf or field rocks, and then scattering the pieces in every direction. We emptied our pockets of any identification cards or letters that might be used against us if the enemy tried to break us down. I tore up my identification cards. We sat down in our litter to await the approaching enemy. The closer they came, the bigger they grew in stature and in number. There clearly were more of them than there were of us. Name, rank and serial number were the only communication to be made. Delbert Berninghaus, Corporal, #37683647, ran through my mind as the Germans drew closer. The place was in the province of Luxembourg. The time was approximately 4:00 p.m.

Before I knew it, we were lined up on a nearby road. The German troops had gathered

us together and marched us to the road where they lined us up four abreast to conduct their search. I could see down the line enemy soldiers taking personal items from our boys and filling their own pockets with anything of value such as money or jewelry. I had on the wrist watch my folks had given me as a gift when I graduated from high school the previous year. Wanting to keep it, I stepped out of line unnoticed by the Germans and slipped the watch from my wrist to my dog chains that hung around my neck. Then stepping back in line I watched as they drew closer to me. Some of the fellows protested the search, some back talked the Germans and these boys were shown little mercy. There were boys roughed up quite badly. Two Germans would conduct the search — one from the front and one from the back of each person in line. When my turn came, they missed discovering my watch, but found a small Bible I carried in my shirt pocket. They took it. In German, I said “My Holy Book!” They looked from it to me and then at each other. The Bible was handed back to me. I’m not sure if it was because it was indeed a “Holy Book” that I was allowed to keep it or the fact that I had addressed them in their native language.

When the search was completed it was time to move out. It was our tenth day on the front, December 16, 1944. The day would end as it began, marching, but this time the march was to a beat of a different drummer. We became prisoners of the German forces, POWs, prisoners of war.

The German army had invaded the southeastern portion of Belgium. The attack began in the Ardennes region, December 16, 1946, the day of our capture. It was a desperate gamble on their part to break through the American lines and advance to the sea. It would cut the Allied army in half. With that goal accomplished, they had hopes of driving the Allies out of France. If Germany failed, the invasion of Allied forces into Germany was certain. It was Germany’s last stand lead by Army Ground Commander, Field Marshall, Walter Model. Model was under Karl Von Rundstedt whom Hitler had retired from command and then recalled to direct the coded assault, “Watch on the Rhine,” later to be known in our history books as the Battle of the Bulge. Watch on the Rhine began under the cover of fog. Supported by a force of 250,000 Germans, the attack broke through the American lines.

I later learned Germany’s advance of 50 miles put them within three miles of the Meuse River in Belgium. Their lines formed a huge bulge into the Belgium territory. The brunt of the attack was dealt to the 106th Division that had been assigned a twenty-seven-mile front. The division was thinly spread to cover the area. My regiment, the 422nd, was on the left or north flank, the 423rd had the center area, and the 424th was on the right or south flank. On our left was the 106th reconnaissance troop, near the town of Malmedy, Belgium. On the first day of the battle, the 106th regiments were so wiped out they were almost destroyed. One was the 422nd; the other the 423rd. A total of 300 men from the two regiments survived; the rest were presumed POWs in Germany.

By the time the German forces had gathered us together, searched us and readied us to move out, dark was moving in. We were separated from our officers, they in one group consisting of other officers and we in another group made up of enlisted men and noncoms (noncommissioned officers). Our officers were allowed to shake our hands and tell us goodbye. On many of their faces were smiles, odd in such a situation, so maybe it was a sign of hope or a wish for courage in the days that lay ahead for all of us. We never saw our officers again.

Our march began in a direction that would eventually lead us to Germany. Under the cover of darkness we moved across the Belgium terrain. The night was cold; we were hungry, tired and discouraged. Escape would have been easy, as the Germans would not have known who had fallen back or dropped out of the march at that point. Perhaps some of our boys did just that. Although I didn’t know everyone, I didn’t notice anyone missing or see anyone attempt to escape. Had I been remotely familiar with the area, I would have attempted to escape. However, being unfamiliar in this country, not knowing where I was, where could I go and know I would indeed be able to get away?

We marched on through the night, stopping briefly to rest and then continued until the dawn of a new day. So much had happened in a twenty-four-hour span. In my mind, I took an inventory of my possessions. I had my watch (still on my dog tag), my Bible, a stub of a pencil, and a small blank book in one pocket of my wool combat jacket. On my feet were wool socks and combat boots. I had my helmet liner made of wool and woolen gloves with leather palms for my hands. Cold and hunger became my companions.

My stomach cried for breakfast and my body longed for rest, but there would be none. We marched on interrupted only by the low hum of approaching planes. As they neared we would dive for protection in the road ditches, our only shelter from the possible bombing. As the planes roared overhead, we would cover our heads with our arms. When the sky again cleared and the danger passed, we would again reassemble to continue our march toward an unknown destination. The roads were deserted and the countryside was a mixture of rolling hills with trees and empty fields. During the first day's march, we passed through what must have been a slaughter field. Dead Allied soldiers, bloated like dead cattle, were lying in the winter snow. Their bodies were stripped of their socks and shoes and other warm articles of clothing. The memory was imprinted in my mind, a memory I would never forget. It was impossible to avoid seeing the bodies, yet we were reluctant to look. There was always a frightening chance that one of those distorted bodies might be recognized by any one of us. I wondered, "Did the Germans march us through this sight as a warning? Did they want us to see their power?" My companions multiplied, fear became more veritable and the real threat of death joined cold and hunger. I reached for God for it was in Him that I could put my hope; it was only He that could give the strength I would need to survive. Hunger, cold, death and fear marched beside us, but my Lord was there too!

After what seemed like an endless night of marching, the light of another day slowly swallowed the darkness. We were very hungry and thirsty. The Germans began promising us food at the next village, but village after village had been bombed, and there was no food. The Germans warned us not to drink water along the roadside or else we would become sick. Thirsty as we were, we drank from puddles in the road, scooping the water in our hands as we marched along.

This new day was no different from the previous day; we continued marching along. We could hear bombs exploding in the distance. When we heard the whistling sounds bombs make prior to exploding we would dive for the ditches. Our troop of prisoners was told not to be concerned if we heard the whistling and not to worry. We paid little heed to their words and lay in the ditches until the sound passed.

Our lives functioned with a new set of rules and regulations. It became our routine to start our marches with a prayer. Frequently, I would be asked to lead the meditation consisting of a heaven-bound plea that asked for the Lord's protection and guidance on our unknown journey across the terrain of Germany. Our devotion would end with the Lord's Prayer said in unison. Just as prisoners of old, we could find comfort in song. We would join together during our marches singing spirituals, folk songs, patriotic songs and Christmas carols. The songs served a purpose: they were a distraction for some, hypnotic for others blocking out suffering and pain, and for others lifting hopes and spirits. We were united in prayer and song. The guards didn't seem to mind; they couldn't speak English, so they had no knowledge of what our music was about.

It became difficult keeping track of the days and what happened on each day. Our hunger became so great, we resorted to stealing. The German farmers had a practice of storing cow beets in their roadside ditches to feed their livestock during the winter months. The cow beets would be covered with dirt and their fermentation produced a kind of silage. We would steal of the beets to feed to ourselves, frequently being shot at by the guards in the process.

Not only was there the constant demand for food by our stomachs; for some of the prisoners there was a craving for cigarettes. Many of the boys were smokers, and they hungered for nicotine as the others hungered for food. There were no cigarettes for them, but the German guards would smoke and toss the smoldering butts to the ground when they finished them. Anywhere from six to seven of the prisoners would dive for the discarded butt in hopes of getting a drag on the cigarette before it went out." Cigarettes were more precious than gold. I was hungry, but my hunger did not compare to those in search of cigarettes.

As we continued deeper into Germany, our nights were sometimes spent in a farmer's barn. We were no longer marching day and night. I was not really sure why our march slowed down, perhaps it was our general physical condition or the fact that Germany had no place for us in their war camps. There would be anywhere from twenty to forty prisoners in a barn. The barns themselves were always very clean and did not smell of the animals that were kept there. In Germany, the barns are attached to their houses and then several of them were clustered together in villages rather than scattered over the countryside. I became the interpreter for our group as I grew up in a German- speaking household. In fact, other than a hired hand that spoke English on my father's farm, German was the only language I heard until I started grade school. The guards would frequently remain with their charges and send me to the farmer in whose barn we might be staying to ask for food. Many of the German people would look on us with compassion and give us what they could. It was never enough to satisfy our hunger; after all, there were many of us to share a pail of raw potatoes or apples. At this point in the war, it did not appear as though the German people had much to share.

As we were herded into the barns for the night, we would repeat our previously established routine. Winters in Germany are much like ours in the Midwest as far as temperatures and weather conditions are concerned. After walking all day through snow, slush, or mud, our feet were always cold and wet or damp. We had no overshoes for protection and any protection that might have built up on our combat boots from polish or care had long worn off. We would remove our shoes and massage each others' feet to warm them and get the blood circulating again. We had no overcoats or blankets, so in an attempt to keep warm, we would huddle together to give each other body heat. After days of the living conditions under which we survived, we were filthy and sick with dysentery. Our very survival depended on each other .

Friendships formed as we bonded together in our struggle for survival. I guess in a strange sense of the word we became a family, looking out for one another. We would find ourselves grouped with the same bunch of boys from day to day, but our guards would change.

By morning our feet would be so swollen it was difficult to push our swollen feet back into our shoes. The guards would again assemble us and the barns usually would be searched by the dogs. Some of the boys attempted to escape by covering themselves with the straw or hay found in the barns. Some tried to hide in the haylofts of the barns; some simply tried running away over the hills. As I said, the barns would be searched by dogs; the dogs used, in most cases, were well trained German Shepherds. These dogs showed no mercy as they literally tore apart the boys hiding or attempting escape. There was no chance of survival when the dogs were turned loose in the barns or in pursuit of those on the run. I remember a change of the guard when I saw one of the dogs rip the clothing right off of a new guard before anyone could control the animal.

Christmas Eve day was eight days after our capture. Here I was, twenty years old, a prisoner of war in Germany, wondering if I would even live to see another Christmas. As usual the day began with marching on the country roads, destination still unknown. At each village we were told, "At the next stop there will be food for you", but the bombs were always ahead of us. Village after village lay in ruins, bombed before we came; our stomachs remained as empty as the German promises.

It was approximately 4 p.m. in the afternoon on Christmas Eve when we arrived in the little village where we would be spending the night. We would again be spending the night in a barn. The guards allowed me to go to the barn owner's home to ask for food. I was hoping for some potatoes or apples. The man answering the door invited me inside. The gentleman was a raw-boned farmer with a warm friendly face. He wore a pair of little round wire-rimmed glasses. I looked around the room and saw no one other than the man, but suspected there were other family members, keeping out of sight. My eyes were immediately drawn to the evergreen tree standing in the room. The Christmas tree was not decorated as ours are today; it was standing there unadorned in all its splendor. I shall never forget the sight of that tree and the memories it triggered. Momentarily, I was at peace. It was beautiful! Away from home and the security I once knew, a lump formed in my throat. My eyes welled with tears. I asked the farmer, "Could you spare some food for me and the boys in the barn? Some apples or some potatoes, for we are very hungry. " On the table lay a coffeecake already cut in wedges. It was pie sized and covered with apple slices. Pointing to the cake, the man said, "Eat it, you eat the whole cake." I did eat the cake, the whole thing. I felt a certain amount of shame because I ate without sharing my treasure and at the same time gratitude. I was so happy. In this strange country of enemies, God had given me a friend. I asked if he had any more so I could give some to the boys. "Oh, no," he said, but he gave me a pail with apples and potatoes that I carried out to the others on that Christmas Eve. They ate the seeds, cores, and peels of the apples and the raw potatoes.

On Christmas morning, I went to thank the farmer and tell him goodbye. He again gave me a bucket of potatoes and apples. Our day was starting out better than it normally did. We again set out on our daily march taking us thirty-five to forty kilometers. This day the American fliers again flew over us; our hope was that they would not drop bombs, but food. To our surprise, they recognized us, dipping their wings. The event was a highlight of our day — our spirits soared. The planes flew on to their mission; we continued our trek across Germany.

I'm guessing it was near Limburg, Germany, when we were herded to a railroad track where boxcars were sitting. The date was shortly after Christmas. The cars were marked Red Cross, but it was obvious they had been used primarily for transportation of livestock. The cars each had a sliding door on one side. At one end, there was a one by three-foot window with another window on the opposite end; two metal bar inserts ran parallel to the windows. About sixty men boarded each boxcar. We were no longer marching but traveling by rail. We remained in that car all night and all day. There was no food or water on board. The door to the boxcar was wired shut from the outside so there was no escape. After our one night trip, our car was stopped on a sidetrack where we would remain for six days. We lived like animals, using the corner of the car as a lavatory; of course with no food or water, the need to relieve oneself was greatly reduced. German villagers would come to the car; we would beg them for water. Some were kind and would pass water up through the window to us.

The Germans were also using the rail system to move war materials in unmarked cars. The Allies became suspicious of our Red Cross cars and began bombing and strafing. The planes fired 20 mm cannon shells that penetrated the boxcar walls and exploded. Shrapnel would shower the interior. Many of the boys were wounded or killed by this action, adding to the casualties of war.

Once I was sure that I had been hit in the back by shrapnel. I had a buddy check my back when I removed my shirt, but I had been lucky. We were sitting ducks in the boxcar; the guards ran for the hills whenever planes approached. Our group began pulling on the metal window bars, and finally on the sixth day of confinement, we were able to remove the bar. I was hoisted up and pushed through the window. No one else wanted to go and I knew that this would be our only hope of survival — or we would be slaughtered in the boxcar. I landed on my feet and moved to the door-side of the car. No time was wasted as I started unwiring the sliding door of the boxcar. I freed my comrades and then moved to the other boxcars to free the other prisoners. Others helped unwire more cars, until several of the wooden deathtraps were emptied. The next time that the planes flew over us, we were ready. Standing, we

formed the letters POW-USA in the snowy field. We were able to identify ourselves to the flyers. Although I did not see the planes signal any sort of recognition, they did not fire upon us. Other prisoners reported seeing the pilot dip his wings and wave.

The guards did not return us to the railroad boxcars, but we did renew our march. The filth and close body contact as we marched was a problem. Body lice, parasites that suck blood for nourishment, were evident in the seams of our clothes. We could see the lice on our bodies. If allowed to rest during a march, it was not unusual to strip our clothes and wash the nits from them in nearby streams. The December temperatures had not improved, so we quickly redressed in our cold, wet clothes before they started freezing into stiff forms. Our body heat would be our clothes dryer. The stream rinse did offer some temporary relief for our itching bodies, but the rinse in the frigid streams was a high price to pay. One form of suffering was replaced by another.

By New Year's night, we had reached a prisoner-of-war camp. My first communication home was from [Stalag IV B at Muhlberg](#), but I believe our first stay was at Dresden. (I think what may have happened was that Dresden was a community we passed and it stuck out in my mind, as it is quite near Muhlberg.) At our first stop, we were placed into a compound with prisoners from all over the world: France, the Soviet Union, England, and the United States. We were quarantined for a period of time as a means of disease control.

One of the first things that happened to us in the prison camp was the removal of our lice-infested clothing. They took our garments and supposedly fumigated them in a gas chamber. If the process did in fact rid our clothing of the lice, it did little good in the long run. We were never given the opportunity to bathe, and it was not long before we were as infested as before. In fact, the problem seemed to worsen. When we lay down at night to sleep, the lice would race across our bodies. There was little room and little warmth, but much bodily contact. At one point, during my captivity, I acquired a knife much like a knife from a set of tableware. It was used to slice our portion of bread into six or seven portions depending on the day of the week. On weekdays seven prisoners shared a loaf and on Sunday only six shared the loaf. I was cutting a bread loaf into the portions that were being rationed to us when I cut through the bread into my leg. The cut was in fact quite deep (deep enough to leave a scar), but there was no bleeding from the wound. Similar incidents happened to other prisoners; we surmised that our blood volume was so low due to our conditions and the lice that we simply had no blood to bleed.

At the first prison or Stalag (as they were known), the men, three to four hundred, were put in a compound within a fenced area of similar structures. Each of the half dozen compounds had a smaller enclosure of chained fencing topped with barbed wire approximately eight feet high. It was into this area that we were allowed to go outdoors. The building itself was long and narrow with windows and dirt floors. There were no beds but there was straw scattered on the floor on which we slept. The building was dimly lit with electric lights. All lights were shut off at the end of our day. I recall one time some of the boys gathered wood scraps from the interior of the building and started a fire on the floor to provide wanted heat. The guards soon doused the flames and voiced their disapproval of the behavior.

Some of the men in our compound were quite inventive. I'm not sure what they used or how they obtained the material, but they constructed a radio on which we were able to get daily broadcasts. We could hear news of the war, but had to use extreme caution so the guards were not aware of these activities. It was wonderful knowing what was happening.

Housed in each complex were prisoners who were being quarantined for a period of six weeks. During that time, we did not receive a physical examination of any kind, but it was the measure used to control any communicable diseases that might be among us. Our compound was isolated from the other compounds housing prisoners arriving at other dates. As the quarantine period was met, those prisoners would be

moved to the other buildings and new prisoners moved in.

The diet while we were detained here was quite consistent. Six men would leave the compound to pick up and deliver our ration. They would return carrying three galvanized tubs of potatoes boiled with their skins. We were then each given three to four of these golf-ball sized spuds as our meal for the day. Needless to say, they were devoured in little time. Sometimes we were fed a grass and turnip soup that was very watery, a cup of soup, never more, often less, but when you are hungry a feast can be made of very little. As I stated earlier, bread ration was seven men to a loaf during the week and on Sunday only six men to a loaf. It was a dark brown bread; when fresh it smelled like the corn silage we fed to our cattle back home. It was made of sawdust, potatoes, wheat and poppy seeds. The bread was never good to eat; it made me gag when it was fresh despite my hunger. I did discover if I saved it and let it dry out, I was able to eat it. One time, I actually found a fairly large piece of wood in my ration of the bread.

The nights were long and cold; sleep did not come easily especially with the continual lice problem. We huddled together or would lie next to one another for warmth and the lice would race from body to body, multiplying in numbers greater than before. We not only felt the lice, but during the daylight hours, could actually see them on our bodies. Now there were not even the frigid streams to rinse our clothes and get some relief . Washing of bodies or clothing was impossible.

It was at Muhlberg where I was issued my prisoner of war numbers to wear with my Army dog tags. Now I had another number, Stalag IV B 313872, and still later I would be issued yet another Stalag number. Here I was given a postcard which I dated January 10, 1945, and sent with a message to my parents. It would take some time before they would receive it. In fact, I was allowed to send a second card, dated January 21, 1945, that they would receive before the first arrived.

Meanwhile, my parents received a Western Union message dated January 11, 1945, stating I had been reported missing in action since December 16, 1944. It would not be until March 8, 1945, that my second postcard would reach them. The first postcard, dated January 10, 1945, reached them March 19, 1945. Upon the receipt of my postcard, my father sent a letter to the War Department informing them of the card received. He enclosed the postcard with the thought that the department did not know that I was a prisoner of war. He requested that the information be properly recorded and he received proper labels to send packages to me. It would not be until April 5, 1945, that my classification as a prisoner of war would reach my parents. On April 11, 1945, a package was mailed to me. It was never to be received but returned to my parents on May 21, 1945. My parents also sent a Christmas package to me (prior to holidays); it was returned to them July 16, 1945.

It is difficult for me to put the preceding and the following events in exact order due to the time lapse and the fact that the diary I kept during my ordeal was lost shortly after my liberation. I recorded my prison life in a small notebook; it was my diary. (This notebook I kept in my breast pocket, but failed to remove it when my clothing was removed and burned at the end of my captivity.)

We were given opportunities to go out on work details. It gave me something to do and I frequently would go. I found if I got my mind off the constant desire for food with other distractions, my hunger was easier to bear. It was a mind game; if I thought I wasn't always dwelling on food, I wouldn't be hungry.

It didn't take a patch of rhubarb long to catch my eye on one of these outings. Before long, I was wishing for some of it and planning how I would get it. I planned to steal it and hide it. At the Stalag, I found an old burlap bag; before long it became my backpack. I asked to go out on work detail so that I could find something to put in my pack. Well, as luck would have it, we were working in the area where I had first seen the rhubarb. I managed to break off some of the stalks and stuff them in my backpack. I was careful not to take all of it. However, it was not long before the

missing produce was noticed. A German was asking, "Who stole the rhubarb?" No one answered. He pointed his finger at me and said, "It has to be the fellow with the backpack." He came over, took my pack, and of course found the evidence. "You could be shot for this you know!" he said. The truth was, I knew it was wrong to take the rhubarb, to steal it, but I didn't think it was so serious a crime as to be shot. I spoke to him in German, telling him I would not repeat the crime; he was compassionate and let me go.

At the Stalag we had what we called "chow detail." Six to eight men would be sent out to get our ration of food. I decided to see if an extra man could get out without being noticed. Instead of eight, nine men went out but not always nine men returned. When I managed to stay out, I would spend the time with some Canadians and Frenchmen. These men were known as trustees.

They had more freedom than the other prisoners, but were themselves prisoners of war. The Canadians and Frenchmen were very kind to me. We became good friends; they would feed me and then the following day I would return to my Stalag. It became my way to get around and I was in very good physical shape with the extra food. Once a Frenchman shared roast beef with me. "Delbert," he said, "you don't know how hard I had to run for this!" He had stolen it from the butcher shop where he worked. How wonderful it was for him to share something he risked his life for with me! If on my outings I could return with extra food, I would share it with my buddies at the Stalag. We had an arrangement where they would pick up my ration if I wasn't there to get it myself. Sometimes I would get something; sometimes I would not.

There was a young man in my group, an American lad; he was about my age and someone I considered my friend. He slept next to me every night; we marched side by side when we were walking on the highways. I inquired about my rations and was told I had received them; someone had gotten them for me. "Where is mine I would ask?" The answer would be that no one knew. I discovered the young man who slept next to me was stealing my rations. He was the reason I did not receive rations when I was out with the trustees. I confronted him, asking "Why do you do this when I bring you back extra food when I can?" He simply replied, "I'm hungry." Some people can endure more than others; this young man just wasn't that strong. In order to protect other prisoners from his actions, the man's only overcoat was painted with the word "THIEF" across the back. It was a means of alerting the others to watch more closely when he was near. That poor man had to wear the coat the rest of the time he was in prison. Not everyone had an overcoat; he was one of the lucky few.

After what seemed like several weeks, we were alerted to the fact we would be leaving the present Stalag very soon. One of the Frenchmen whom had befriended me took me aside. "Boy, you are just like my son, you remind me so much of him. You cannot leave and march without taking food with you." He and his friends obtained a suitcase somewhere; it was about two-feet long. They filled it with food for my journey.

The marches began again. In the beginning, I had my suitcase. It was heavy and slowed me down; I pretended to be lame. It was not long before a German guard noticed me. He urged me to get rid of the extra baggage so I could keep pace with the others. "No!" I would say, "I'll carry it". I would hurry along walking a little faster for a time, but in the end my pace always slowed again. The cycle would repeat itself, and so I went until the suitcase became lighter and finally empty. It was a difficult time. I knew I had to protect myself. It was each man for himself, a very selfish way to be. When I would open my case of food, I did it as privately as possible. I tried to be away from the rest; it was almost a relief when the food was gone and the suitcase empty. I no longer had to feel self-conscious about eating, and I could finally toss the extra baggage into the ditch as the guard wanted me to do.

We were marching for what seemed to be weeks without end, eighteen to twenty miles a day, frequently without food. We would pick up garbage as our only

nourishment. The villagers would toss out peelings from their potatoes, and we would eat them. Occasionally, we would be where there were bread rations for us.

Sometimes our march would begin in one direction, and we would march all day long only to retrace our route the following day back to our origin. There must have been times we were changing direction with the advancement of the Allied troops. We could sense the German army was getting desperate, and our guards were beginning to suffer along with us as food for them also became scarce.

Our guards were as hungry as we were. During our march deeper into German territories, there were villages where civilians would offer food to us. The guards would frequently push the prisoners aside and consume all the food themselves. Sometimes luck was on our side, and we would get a small portion for ourselves. On one occasion, the guard was holding us back when some villagers tried to give us vegetables. He was a small-boned, thin fellow with little round glasses resting on his nose. Thinking he was going to have the feast himself, I said to him, "You grosses swine." (I called him a big pig in his native tongue.) He started chasing after me with a whip as I dodged him by running the ranks up to the front of the line. At the front, the commanding officer asked "Was gehts on hier?" (What goes on here?) The guard rightly accused me of calling him a big pig. The officer then turned to me and told me that I could indeed think such thoughts, but I did not have to say them. I was to remain in the front of the line for my punishment. In a few days I started working my way back in the line so I was again back with my group.

Prisoner of war camps were few and far between. Many were full of prisoners with no room for more men. We would march to a camp hoping to stay, hoping things would improve for us, but they never did. Boys became so hungry they would sell their watches, wedding rings, or dog tags; anything might be sold for a bite to eat. It was only by God's grace that some of the men were able to continue at this point. It is here I wish to mention the Red Cross parcels we received. They were a rare blessing for many prisoners of war, but what lifesavers they were when we were lucky enough to get them. The parcels were designed, I believe, for each prisoner to receive the whole package. None of the prisoners I knew ever received a whole package. My experience was to share in only one package at the last prisoner of war camp I was in. I thank God for that parcel; it was a blessing to receive it, and as I mentioned earlier, truly lifesavers for many; without them surely more men would have died. The boxes contained things such as jam, coffee, sardines, salt and pepper, corned beef, sugar, cheese, biscuits, cigarettes, prunes, and peanuts. I especially remember the prunes and candies that provided energy. Just to show how selfish we became, I will tell you of a time that still brings me shame. I shared my box with one of my best friends, Fritz Lopez. We divided everything equally, counting out even the prunes. I accused Fritz of stealing one of my prunes; how greedy one becomes when one is hungry.

The forced marches were probably a God-send in my case. The temperatures were extremely low and my feet were always cold. I'm sure the marches were what kept my feet from totally freezing. There was a time when my feet were so frostbitten the Germans were convinced my feet needed to be amputated. I out and out refused to allow this to happen. I spoke to them in German telling them, "No, I am keeping my feet!" I wanted to live, to come home alive and with my feet. At night, I would remove my shoes and rub my feet to try to get the circulation going again. The pain was almost unbearable, but with God's help I was able to continue and to keep my transportation, my feet. Prayers never ceased.

Another time, I was terribly sick. During a break in the marching I was ready to give up. I, like hundreds of the boys, knew to drop out was death. I laid down beside the road and told my friends to leave me there when the marching resumed. They begged and coaxed me to continue, promising to help me along the way. I got up when the time came and shuffled along with the rest. It was during this time I started dreaming and planning to escape. Perhaps it was those ideas that pushed my body into a healing mode. I did begin to feel better. If I was to survive and go home alive, I

decided I would have to escape.

I formulated a plan where I could take my friend, Fritz Lopez, with me. I could only risk taking one. Fritz was a very aggressive young man, a member of the Second Division. He and I had thought of escaping early in our captivity when we were temporarily housed in a brick factory. We had been left on the third floor when the time came to move on. It would have been easy to find a hiding place and stay, but the factories were Allied targets and we didn't chance it. The dogs were always the last to leave, making a final search. We had not reached desperation levels, but now was another story.

We continued to stay in village barns when they were available. We had just spent the night in one when Fritz and I decided to make our move. I would hide Fritz in the box of a wagon, covering him with straw. He would remain behind and I would simply ask to be left due to my diarrhea. It was so bad, I thought the guards would just let me lay in the corner of the barn. I managed to hide Fritz, but that is where the plan ended. The guards listened to my tale of ills and then insisted, "We have wagons, we will haul you." Fritz was able to remain hidden and I was off in the wagon. Soon thereafter my bowels cried for relief; I needed to "do a job."

There were forests on both sides of the road. The march stopped not far from the village for a break. Canadian prisoners of war were guarding me while I was in the wagon. The French and the Canadian prisoners had been some of the first captured and had gained the trust of the German guards. They were sometimes put in positions of trust and known as trustees by the other prisoners. Perhaps there had become a need for the German soldiers on the front or perhaps it was because our numbers were so great and the Nazi forces were not providing enough personnel for guarding that the trustee system developed. I told the Canadians I was going to the woods to relieve myself and I would appreciate it if they did not come and look for me. I walked into the wooded area and covered myself with leaves. The Canadians granted my wish and did not search for me. (I had escaped close to Kassel, Germany.) I lay in the leaves; the deer came. They watched with a sense of knowing something was amiss, but not seeing me, they paid little heed to my presence. I prayed that the Nazi police dogs would not find me! Finally, I felt it might be safe to get up and go back to the village and find Fritz. My sense of direction always has been poor and this time was no different.

I returned to the village, but began my search for Fritz at the wrong end. I couldn't find the barn. During my brief fling with freedom a German lady invited me into her home. She asked me if I was hungry, "Would you like something to eat?" We conversed in German, "Yes, I would appreciate food." She gave me some mashed potatoes and a hard-boiled egg. I was so thankful for her food and kindness to me. I thanked her. She told me, "If I get caught doing this for you they will kill me. I am doing this for you because my husband is a prisoner of war in your country. I hope he is being treated as I am treating you." I assured her I thought he would be treated well in America.

I continued my search for Fritz but not for long. Some villagers reported a stranger on their street and it was only a short time before I was picked up and returned to the front lines of the prisoners that had passed through the village. I would later learn Fritz had been lucky. He was able to escape back to American hands. He would spend thirty days in an American hospital. After a period of leave time, he would return to service this time as a paratrooper. Fritz and I corresponded for several years until one Christmas I sent a card and never heard from him again.

I vowed to my friends, I would not spend my May 19 birthday there but back in American hands. I was watched very closely for some time.

The German civilians would frequently ask me, "Why are you here?" My German reply would always be, "We are here to keep Hitler from conquering the whole world." I did like being able to communicate with the people; it was nice for me to know their

language. It also gave me a bit of status with the guards because I could understand them too.

I again became a desperate man. It was unknown to us how the war was faring. I decided to attempt another escape. This time I would go alone. I watched for a chance with no real plan in mind. This time, I simply slipped away; hiding behind some trees. As I walked on a road, a German farmer riding by on a horse-drawn wagon picked me up. He asked me if I would work for him. "Yes," was my German reply, "I will work for you." He helped me into his wagon and it was decided I would go home with him. As his team of horses carried me closer to his home, I suddenly became violently ill. Much later, I would learn this was the first of a series of attacks of appendicitis. I wanted to vomit but could not. The farmer urged me to stick my finger down my throat to induce vomiting. I took his advice but it was useless. We came to a small house where he stopped the horses and helped me inside.

While there we could hear a distant rumbling that seemed to be coming closer to our position. I thought the Americans were coming. "It can't be the Americans," the gentleman cried. "It has to be the Americans," I countered. We waited and watched. The farmer had a pair of large binoculars (some of the nicest I have seen) that he used to look in the direction of the sounds we heard. We took turns looking through the field glasses. Finally, I could see the American star on the side of a tank. "It is the Americans," I cried! What a thrill it was for me to see that star! I thanked God for being able to see an American soldier to protect me. Despite my physical weakness, I suddenly felt very strong. I told the German gentleman to stay inside the house. "I'm going down to the Americans. I won't tell them you are here if you just let me go." I didn't know if he would try to stop me. "All right," he said. I was off. I met the Americans. They asked me if the house was occupied. "There is no one there," I lied. Yes, I lied. Was it sinful to do so under the circumstances? I don't know. The German farmer helped me and I in turn helped him. I know he intended no harm to the troops; he had no weapons. We were both free!

My escape was accomplished at last! I begged the fellows in the tanks to go and help the rest of the prisoners of war. I told them the direction the march was heading. "They are marching them to death!" I told them, "Go and help them!"

The American soldiers were going from village to village collecting all the German soldiers they could find. German soldiers were deserting the cause and hiding in the villages. I was given a gun to carry. How proud I was to be able to carry a gun again. How brave I felt crying, "Come out of there!" as we searched for the enemy. They would come out of the buildings and it was I who would be searching them. The tide had turned; it was they who were fearful and hiding now. I was told to take everything the German soldiers had, just as they had taken everything from the American prisoners. I did as ordered. What a day, what a victory for me to be once again the proud American soldier.

My glory was not to last the day however, for the hot appendix would not be forgotten. The evening brought another attack. I was loaded into a truck, but we were unable to get through the German line that night. We stayed in a house of some sort until the next morning. The American troops broke through the line and we were on our way to a field hospital. I was sent to a hospital in Paris, France.

All memory is gone as to how I arrived or how long I stayed at the hospital. I had been a prisoner of war for five months. When I entered the service, I weighed in at 160 pounds; in the hospital my weight was recorded at 116 pounds. I do remember our clothing was removed and put on a pile outside the hospital where it was burned. This is where I think I may have lost my diary of events - I forgot to remove it from my jacket pocket. I had kept the diary of all that had happened while we were POWs, writing in it almost every day. It had the names of the villages we had passed through on our marches. To this day I still wish I had it.

I do remember receiving special treatments to remove the lice. How wonderful it felt

to soak in warm water — to bathe. As POWs, we were put on special diets. Feedings were five times a day and everything was liquid. Others were easily identified by looking at the stomach, for almost every prisoner of war developed a potbelly. While in the Paris hospital, I again had an attack of appendicitis. I bloated up like a balloon. Not knowing what was happening to me, I went to the nurse's station. As I staggered in, the nurse looked up and laughingly asked, "What's the matter with you?" I answered with, "I wish I knew!" She dispensed some pills to relieve what she thought was gas and I went on my way. The problem again subsided and I was fine.

There was a time while at the hospital I was given a pass to go to the city with one of my buddies. We walked all the way (how far it was I do not recall). Both of us were country boys from small communities and although we had seen some of the world, we were rather surprised with what Paris revealed to us. We took in the sights including the Eiffel Tower. Two things still stand out in my mind. One was the coloring the Paris women put in their hair. We saw purples, yellows and oranges. The other was the street vendors with their wares. The sale of live crabs caught our eye, so we each purchased one. The civilians would try to take them from us as we walked along. My friend finally gave up the battle and lost his, but mine came back to the hospital.

All my daring had not been compromised by my previous months' experiences. I decided to have a little fun with the lad who slept next to me in the ward of the hospital. I took that big old crab and put it at the foot end in his bed while he was gone. You can imagine what happened when he returned to bed. The lad came back, crawled into his bed and was out like a torpedo when his foot hit the crab. His eyes were as big as saucers while the rest of us struggled with our pent-up laughter. He pushed it with two sticks down to the nurse's station. The nurse tossed it into a wastebasket. When the nurse left the room, I retrieved the creature and took it down to the French cooks in the kitchen. I didn't get to eat any of it, but I sure had fun with it!

It was June 1, 1945, when I was transferred by stretcher to a plane and flown back to the United States. We landed at Long Island, New York. I was given a choice as to which state and which hospital in that state I would like to be admitted to as a patient. I wanted to go home to Iowa. Clinton had a hospital, Schick General, so that was my choice.

I was transported to Schick. It was a surprise for me to see Margaret Shellmeyer, a nurse at the hospital, who was from my hometown. Her husband Lee Gary also worked there, in the surgery department. It was nice to see someone I knew. Of course, my parents had been notified of my arrival in Clinton; they didn't waste any time to travel from West Bend to Clinton to see me. My appendix was not to be forgotten, in fact, it was shortly after my parents' departure from the hospital, I again experienced an attack of appendicitis. It was painful to even have people touch me. The medical staff was baffled by my condition. The pain was more than I could bear. As I lay on the bed, I'm sure I passed out. I was taken to the operating room.

An appendectomy was preformed. I would later learn from Lee Gary, who was helping the surgeon, my abdominal cavity was green. My appendix had ruptured and resulted in a need to flush my abdominal organs of the infectious slime that covered everything. Lee Gary told me, "They threw everything out of you and washed it. Everything was green!"

My parents were notified by phone of the emergency just as they returned home. They turned around and returned again to Schick hospital where they found me enclosed in an oxygen tent. I remember talking to them through the tent. I was told I would have to stay flat on my back because my tissues were so thin they feared something might rupture. I would be on my back for almost 90 days.

I thought I was getting along rather well; the surface wound from the incision healed. But an abscess developed on the inside and a tunnel of pus worked its way to the

surface of my skin. At first, the staff tried treatment that consisted of penicillin swabs being inserted into the tunnel. It was a painful experience, one I endured without painkillers. The program of treatment was not gaining the desired results so I was again scheduled for surgery. It was necessary to remove the infected tissue. It was then that healing began. Before long, I was able to get up.

Finally, on September 4, 1945, I received my medical discharge from Schick General Hospital at Clinton, Iowa. I was allowed transportation to anywhere I wanted to go from the hospital. Before I returned home to West Bend, I decided to use my transportation in another direction. I felt the need to visit the Hansen family in Indianapolis, Indiana. They had befriended me while I was stationed at Camp Atterbury. I was treated like a son. My own family had visited me several times at the hospital, now I needed to see the Hansens. The Hansens had written many letters to my family while I was missing in action, a POW, and while I was hospitalized. So I postponed my trip home to my devoted family thinking I might not have the opportunity to visit the Hansens *[pictured left]* again. (This later proved to be true.)

My visit was unannounced on my part; I wanted it to be a surprise. The Hansen family would frequently go for an outing at the train station. They would go and watch the people arriving and boarding the trains. As God planned it, the Hansens were at the station that evening of my arrival and saw me getting off the train. They were so surprised and happy to see me. Our reunion lasted a week and then I was headed for home, back to my hometown and my life.

LETTERS—TELEGRAMS—PICTURES

Letter from England, written 11-12-44.

Postmarked: West Bend, Iowa December 18, 1944

Dear Folks & Gilbert,

Hoping this letter finds all of you in the best of health, I'm feeling fine.

How's the chickens laying now. Sure would like to have some of those fresh eggs now. Say, Mother, do you think that you could sent me some pickled duck or something like that? Don't go to any bother. If you can do it easy, I sure would appreciate it a great deal, and I couldn't return the favor for a long time.

It's raining again, I never saw so much rain! It rains, snows, and sun shines also in the same day. The way the people talk it's that way the whole year around.

Did the cream checks come up yet or are the cows walking it all out in the corn stubble? Sure wish I could go after them on Daisy or Flory or with our dog.

I guess Roosevelt won the election again. Well, I hope he ushers the war along a little faster. I thought I better write tonight because I'll be away for three of four days. I'm going on pass, so may God be with all till I hear from you.

Your Son Delbert

Letter reprinted in the hometown newspaper.

November 24, 1944

Dear Frank and Friends,

I can't think of anything to say as so many of the boys have already been in England and expressed their feelings about the country on a whole.

The climate is very damp the year around but it doesn't worry the people here. They just work in the rain. The fences are of small chips of rock which makes a very

nice job. Every rock is placed, so I know it took years and years to build them. Some farmers have hedges for their fences and they keep them trimmed just like people do around their yards. The country is very neat. The people, no matter if he is a laboring man or a business man, wear ties to work.

The women all smoke. It isn't a new habit for them because the older ones are just as bad. They walk and work just like the men, with the cigarettes right in their mouths . . .

I went to London on a four-day pass and saw what damage was really done. Most people do not realize the extent of the damage. The stores have more things in them than our own have, but everything is rationed or so high that the people can't touch them. They also have black markets over here, only their prices are higher.

I must say that the American Red Cross is something any person can put his money into and know the boys are going to get a benefit out of. The American Red Cross is located all over on this side and the boys are getting a great benefit out of it. So if you want to help the boys, give to the Red Cross.

I can't think of anything more to say, but if anyone would care to drop me a line, I would sure appreciate it because news is very far between in this country. And may I wish you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

**Your friend,
Pfc. Delbert Berninghaus 37683647
Co. I 422 Inf.
APO 433 c/o Postmaster
New York, N.Y.**

First Card Sent from Stalag IV B Kriegsgefangenenlager Datum: Jan 10, 1945

Dear Folks,

I'm feeling fine hoping you are all in the best of health. Mother, will you sent me five pounds of chocolate and put six pounds of clothes in it like socks an underwear. The weather is cold like at home. Well, the space is getting small so I say may the Lord be with you all. Love, Delbert

**Western Union
Ck.44 Gov't. Washington D.C. Jan. 11 , 1945 11 :43 P.M.
Rudolph B. Berninghaus R.R. #1
West Bend, IA.**

The Sec. of the War desires me to express his deep regret that your son Pvt. 1st class Delbert H. Berninghaus has been reported missing in action since 16 December in Germany. If further details or other information are received you will be promptly notified.

Dunlap Acting the Adjutant General

**Second Card Sent from Stammlager VIIIA
Kriegsgefangenenlager
Datum: Jan. 21 , 1945**

Dear Folks, I'm hoping you are all fine as I am. Getting alone fine myself. How's everything at home? Say hello to the other kids and the creamery boys for me. Tell Rinin family hello also. This will be my permitted place for the war. How's my cow and yours? I hope you sold some bulls. Love Delbert

Western Union

CK.42 Gov't. Washington, D.C. April 5, 1945 2:00 P.M.
Rudolph B. Berninghaus (Sr)
Rural Route 1
West Bend, IA.

The Sec. of War desires me to inform you that your son Pfc. Berninghaus, Delbert H. is a Prisoner of War of German Government based on information received through Provost Marshall General. Further information received will be furnished Provost Marshall General.

J. A. Ulio The Adjutant General

On May 8, 1945, my parents received this letter written in Paris.

Dear Folks,
I suppose you have received by now that I'm safe again, and I can say that I'm just lucky. I don't know anything to write but I sure would like to hear from you again and tell me how everything is again. It's been quite some time since we received any letters. If you sent any packages before I was captured well I didn't receive any, to my disadvantage. I'm in France now. My nerves quite bad. I wish I could get away from the sound of planes. We had some very close calls by planes. I suppose you have the oats sowed. I wish I could be on the tractor once more. Just send me the word that you are all well. Use that address in c/o N.Y., N.Y. I have a backache all the time now. I walked around six to seven hundred miles in that time I was a prisoner and you can believe the papers on what they say about the Germans because it's all so because I saw it with my own eyes. I'll tell you my experiences whenever I get home again. I shouldn't want to live through it again. In fact I don't know how I stood up to such treatment and thank you for teaching me German. And, Father , you take the fifty dollars back again.

Love, Del

Letter postmarked 5-8-45. Second Letter sent from Paris.

Dear Folks,
Feeling fine - hope all of you feel the same. How's the bean planting coming along by now? I suppose they have those things all running smoothly by now. It was in the paper we receive at the hospital that all ex-prisoners are suppose to come back to the States and guard the P .W. I was hoping that they would discharge us so I could come home and work on the farm again. I'm going to think of some way out if possible. Mother, how many chicks did you get this year? I hope not so many so that you don't have to work so hard because I know Father and Gilbert are very busy and don't have much time to help you. When you write, use airmail stamps and I'll receive them sooner. It's hard for me to write because I can't think of anything to write about being in a hosp. and not seeing any active things going, so you understand. Did you ever receive word that I was a prisoner or not? Well, I guess you know it now, and I'm sure I know you won't believe my story when I get home again and I am in pain now. Did you ever get the bulls sold and how is that other system working out by now? I'll sign off with all my love.

Your son, Del

Western Union
E.F .M. Sans Arigine Received May 10, 1945
Mrs. R. B. Berninghaus
West Bend, Iowa

Letters sent. No news of you for sometime. My love and greetings on Mother's Day.
Delbert H. Berninghaus

**Western Union
CK. 53 Gov't. Washington D. C. May 19, 1945 10:01 A.M.
Rudolph Berninghaus
Rural Route 1
West Bend, Ia.**

The Chief of Staff of the Army directs me to inform you, your Son Pvt. Berninghaus Delbert H. returned to Military control and is being evacuated to the United States within the near future and will be given an opportunity to communicate with you upon arrival if he has not already done so.

Ulis, The Adjutant General.

**Letter to: PFC Delbert Berninghaus
37683647
Ward B 1 7
Hosp. RL T 4318 A.P .0. 887
c/o Postmaster New York, N.Y.
From: R. B. Berninghaus
West Bend,
Iowa June 1-1945**

**Dear Son Delbert,
Received your welcome letter last Monday. Had quit writing to you - thought you would be drifting in, but it seems a long time waiting. Rudolf got a letter stating you are still in France. The weather here is so wet and rains every day - have not worked in the field since May 19 but a lot of it will never come up. Also got my beans planted but there is a lot of planting to do yet. Had a fine letter from Herbert Hansen yesterday. Also had our Elevator meeting last night. Had a good year - we are paying \$56,000.00 in rebates. Same director got back in. Was in Algona today and had a tooth fixed. Levi Frieden was here today and started setting up the hay loader. Sheared our sheep last week and sold it in Algona - got 42 cents - it averaged 12#. We were in Des Moines a week ago Tuesday.**

Had a birthday dinner with the Rienens last Sunday. That was quite a letter you had in the *Journal* last week. Things were really tough the way you write and you can sure thank God to be able to tell about it.

Pauline got married to Eugene Elbert and they are working for Uncle Otto.

Your cow had twin calves last December - we lost the calves and nearly lost the cow but she is OK now but does not milk like last year. Well I must get to bed - hope you will be home soon.

**Best regards and a happy landing.
Your parents & Gilbert**

(Note: This letter was sent but appears to have been returned to sender June 16, 1945.)

**Western Union
CK 241 extra Gov't Clinton Ia June 14-1945 3:13 PM
Mr. R. B. Berninghaus
West Bend, Ia**

Your son Pfc. Delbert H. Berninghaus seriously ill this Hospital with ruptured appendix. You will be notified of any change in his condition.

Winn C. O. Schick General Hospital

Page last revised 11/13/2006